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Fresno State Graduates First Women's Cohort

Photo by CCWF Paper Tr

Graduate Joanna Gomez embraces former college coordinator Gale Fry.

By Mimi Le

On March 11, 2025, a large crowd gathered at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) to honor 20 students – the first people in a California women's prison to graduate from Degrees of Change, California State University, Fresno's in-prison bachelor's program.

The program began in the spring of 2021 during strict COVID-19 restrictions. One of the many obstacles students and faculty faced was the need to separate students by yard and hold classes on Zoom.

For that reason, Degrees of Change was the first program at CCWF that allowed an incarcerated individual to possess a laptop. Most of the participants had never used one before. Students had to navigate this new world of technology while keeping pace with full-time jobs, self-help groups, and workloads of up to four classes each semester.

"Those graduating today are an inspiration," said Emma Hughes, Degrees of Change coordinator.

Lisa Fore, CCWF college coordinator, echoed the sentiment.

"It's exciting to see these faces that have come in and out of our door for the past 10 years have this great accomplishment," Fore said. "I am truly having a proud parent moment."

Students expressed similar pride. "This [bachelor's degree] was me proving to myself that my past does not dictate my future," graduate Stacey Dyer said.

The atmosphere was electric with excitement as the graduates waited anxiously for the event to begin. Some graduates stood at the doors to the visiting room, awaiting visitors who came to celebrate their loved ones.

"We are so very proud of our little Jesse," said Rita Lawson, the grandmother of graduate Jessica Holmes, who came all the way from Sacramento to revel at Holmes' achievement. Family and friends who could not attend supported

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CCWF Celebrates Cinco de Mayo

Bing AI generated image by CCWF Paper Trail

By Amber Bray

On May 5, 2025, Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) held its first large-scale Cinco de Mayo event in the gym. Residents who signed up to participate were greeted with red, white, and green decorations celebrating Mexico and Mexican culture.

As participants entered the gym and walked past a "Bienvenidos" banner, they were given a handmade flag, maraca, fan, or flower to commemorate the occasion. Retired Chief Deputy Warden Velda Dobson-Davis, a frequent CCWF program provider, coordinated the event to "educate people culturally."

"If people know where they came from, they can find their purpose," Dobson-Davis said. "My goal is to help educate the population and staff."

Cinco de Mayo, a holiday largely celebrated in the United States, memorializes the battle of Puebla. In the early 1860s, French troops were sent to conquer Mexico City but encountered resistance when they reached Puebla. Mexican General Ignacio Zaragoza commanded approximately 2,000 troops who were poorly trained and equipped. In contrast, the French cavalry and infantrymen numbered roughly 6,000. The Mexican soldiers, with help from local citizens and Zacapoaxtla natives, stopped the French forces from taking the city on three separate attempts, the last on May 5, 1862.

Cinco de Mayo has gained

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COMMENTARY

The Power of Prop 57 Second Chances

A conversation with Marta Barreto about accomplishing great things post-release.

Photo Courtesy of Marta Barreto

Marta Barreto stands in front of a Virgin Orbit plane that launches rockets into space.

By Betty Martinez

Marta Barreto was sentenced to 24 and a half years in California, at the age of 42. Due to the passing and implementation of Proposition 57, the Public Safety and Rehabilitation Act of 2016, Barreto was resentenced to time served after two years. She walked out of the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) in 2019. Her story attracted the attention of documentary makers, and a film about her journey called "From Darkness to Orbit" is set for release in 2025.

This conversation about second chances and the desire for transformation has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What was your original sentence and how did you get released early?

A: My original sentence was a determinate term of 24 and a half years. Proposition 57 reduced my sentence by 22 and a half years. This chance to start over played a vital role in the [sense] that I have liberties I couldn't see before, due to the adverse experiences I endured as a child. I had been sexually abused and sex trafficked as an adolescent, which led to substance abuse as a means to cope into my adulthood.

Q: How did your prison experience impact your drive post-release?

A: My prison experience impacted my drive to change and seek healing in a huge way. I enrolled in self-help groups such as [the faith-based restorative justice program] Bridges to Life and LifeScripting [a therapy-centered program designed to facilitate personal growth]. They pushed me to look into my indiscretions and to take accountability. I had to really understand that in order to become physically, mentally and emotionally whole– as well as sober–, I needed to let go of past hurts, shame, resentments and anger. I had to take ownership of my part in the actions I took to get to prison. Bridges to Life and LifeScripting saved me in ways I cannot fully explain.

Q: What are some achievements you have obtained since being released?

A: I acquired two degrees, my Bachelor's in Science and Technical Studies and my Master's in Business Administration from California State University San Bernardino. I got hired as a propulsion technician building rocket engines for Virgin Orbit, and worked there until they closed. I now work as a process engineer technician at Phillips-Medisize. I was awarded the Cal State San Bernardino Jack H. Brown College of Business social justice scholarship because of my desire to speak about the value of second chances. I also have a documentary film about me called "From Darkness to Orbit" that will be completed this year. In January, the judge who originally sentenced me granted me expungement of my criminal record. She said she had never seen anyone who has been released accomplish so much in five years. This was a full circle moment for me that I will never forget. And in April, San Bernardino County also just granted the dismissal of my remaining cases.

Q: What is it about your life today that calls you to extend your story to those still system-impacted?

A: Really, I just want to plant seeds of hope, courage and empowerment. I mentor juveniles facing life sentences in Orange County, CA, and have been invited to do the same in Riverside County as well. In 2024, I was declared the Mentor of the Year in Orange County by the Hub for Integration, Reentry & Employment (H.I.R.E.) for my work in dealing with both juveniles and adult males. The truth that change and transformation are possible and worth it is why I will continue to do so.

Q: Are there any parting words you'd like to give the women at CCWF?

A: Do whatever it takes to sift through your past, your darkness, your demise, to unravel and let go of what has held you captive for so long, what led you down the path of criminal activity. Go to groups and be truthful and transparent. Fight for your life, your children's lives, no matter how hard or how much. Look in the mirror and take accountability for your part.

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NEWS

Assembly Bill 622

Proposed changes to credit earnings give lifers and long-termers hope.

By Amber Bray

Lifers, long-termers and their loved ones may not be familiar with the case named "Criminal Justice Legal Foundation et al v California Department of Corrections et al", but they undoubtedly know the impact: the subtraction of milestone and rehabilitative achievement credits (RAC) from the time an incarcerated individual has to serve after being found suitable for parole. Effective in 2024, this change continues to impact individuals appearing before the Board of Parole Hearings (BPH) on an almost daily basis.

Individuals earn RAC and milestone credits when they participate in self-help groups, education and college classes, substance abuse programs, and other rehabilitative endeavors. These types of programs are offered in carceral facilities in California to allow individuals to actively address the issues that led to their criminal behavior, upgrade educationally and vocationally, and achieve sobriety, among other goals.

According to the California Code of Regulations, one of the primary objectives of carceral facilities is to allow "every reasonable opportunity and encouragement to participate in rehabilitative activities." Beyond the intrinsic motivation people have to pursue their rehabilitation, RAC and milestones provide some extrinsic motivation for those endeavors.

But, after the recent court decision, the extrinsic motivation for lifers and long-termers was tempered somewhat since it precludes them from being released prior to their minimum eligible parole dates (MEPD) – a date calculated without applying RAC and milestones.

Now, Assembly Bill 622, authored by Assemblymember Ash Kalra (D-San Jose), could change how BPH applies those credits to parole dates. The bill would require the Secretary of Corrections to "apply all applicable credits" for those serving one or more life terms, amending Penal Code section 3046.

Assembly member Ash Kalra posing for his portrait.

These changes would help many, including Central California Women's Facility resident Carline Angel Balbuena. Balbuena was re-sentenced in 2023 following an exceptional conduct referral pursuant to Penal Code 1172 by the Secretary of Corrections. Balbuena then appeared before BPH on Aug. 14, 2024, and was found suitable for parole.

Next, as a general rule, BPH and the governor review parole cases following suitability hearings to ensure the finding of suitability is upheld.

Following her suitability finding, Balbuena's case was referred to the en banc panel of BPH in part to determine whether her parole plans were solid. After a hearing on her case, her parole grant was affirmed. In so doing, BPH also affirmed that Balbuena had realistic parole plans.

This process is typically concluded in no more than 150 days. But, unlike so many lifers she had observed over the years, Balbuena did not parole five months after she was found suitable for parole.

Instead, Balbuena's parole date was calculated to be Aug. 15, 2025. But that date could change again, depending on a prerelease audit where credits are recalculated. Balbuena suspects her parole date could change to Aug. 19, 2027.

When dates get scheduled too far into the future, a number of potential problems arise, as Balbuena explained.

"I'm concerned that if I have to wait two more years, the transitional housing I've been accepted to may be out of business. Anything could happen with that," Balbuena said. Similarly, solid parole plans generally include one or more job offers, which Balbuena has.

"Jobs that have been offered may no longer be available when I parole. It's putting a burden on stability – all of that can be taken away in two years," Balbuena said.

Another thing that can be taken away at any time is a person's good health. Balbuena, who suffers from health conditions, wants to be able to parole and still work. "Over two years, my health might get worse. I may get out and be dependent on the government when I could have had a job," she said.

Relatedly, individuals who have MEPDs far in the future may suffer the death of a loved one who is waiting for them or watch a loved one become ill during that time. Balbuena is concerned that her sister, who is not in the best of health, may worsen before she can parole.

If passed, AB 622 will ensure that credits earned by lifers and long-termers in pursuit of their rehabilitation will count towards their parole dates and allow individuals who no longer pose a danger to society to reenter the community in a timely way. Further, AB 622 will save California taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars annually by no longer incarcerating individuals who have been deemed suitable for parole. For Balbuena specifically, she would be released immediately and allowed to rejoin society.

First Healing Trauma Graduation at CCWF

By Nora Igova

On April 10, 2025, Emily Gonzalez–34 years old and on her second prison term–had a new experience.

Instead of a bad attitude, she put on a purple cap and gown and joined 35 other graduates in celebrating their completion of the Healing Trauma program, in the B-side visiting room at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

The Healing Trauma program was first written in 2011 by Stephanie Covington, a clinician and consultant specializing in addiction, trauma and recovery. She has helped California Department of Correction and Rehabilitation (CDCR) develop "effective gender-responsive and trauma-informed services," according to her website.

The intensive, three-month course at CCWF is designed to address trauma and is currently coordinated by retired Chief Deputy Warden Velda Dobson-Davis.

In partnership with Covington, criminologist Nena Messina has been conducting research since 2014 to assess if the program is effective, by surveys and utilizing control groups.

Messina said that the participants have consistently shown improvement in prosocial behavior, less anger and hostility, and more empathy.

Teaira Jones, another CCWF resident and first-time graduate, explained her sense of accomplishment and desire to continue this behavioral pattern.

"What stood out to me from the Healing Trauma is the victim impact," Jones said. "The things I put to the world and caused trauma to others out of selfishness."

Gonzalez shared how she felt a healthy sense of belonging. "I learned that trauma comes from multiple sources and so does healing," Gonzalez said. "Before I am able to move forward, I have to get rid of the junk."

Gonzalez proudly posed with her certificate of completion. "I will send my graduation photo to my four-year-old son, so he can form a belief that achievements are possible," Gonzalez said.

The ceremony's message also made clear the importance of healing for incarcerated individuals themselves, in addition to victims and families.

Asali Richardson, a peer facilitator, closed out the graduation with a message to all: "Challenge yourself to be the best every single day for yourself."

Photo courtesy of CDCR

Program creator Stephanie Covington presents graduate Emily Gonzalez with her certificate.

COVER STORY: FRESNO GRADUATION

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Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Left: Graduate Renecha Gulley giving a heartfelt speech bringing tears of joy to the audience. Right: Graduate Rebecca Braswell moves the tassel from Ervin's honorary cap.

their loved ones via Zoom live stream.

Applause and cheers rang out loudly as the familiar "Pomp and Circumstance" emanated from the sound system and the graduates filed into the room.

As Hughes began her welcome speech to the crowd, she started by acknowledging La Shanté Ervin. Ervin was a part of the original cohort but passed away before completing the program. In remembrance of her, a chair sat amongst the graduating class that had her photograph, a hat, a tassel, and a graduation gown to signify her honorary place in the program.

Julian Ramos, an extended education specialist at Fresno State, presented a Certificate of Achievement for Ervin that will later be mailed to her family.

CCWF Warden Anissa De La Cruz told the audience, "It's special for me because I am a Fresno State graduate."

Two graduates gave speeches reflecting on the hard work and obstacles in their personal lives and within the prison that they all overcame. Eileen Huber and Renecha Gulley brought laughter and tears to the crowd with their words.

"This has been a life-changing journey that I will never forget and am forever honored to have achieved," Huber said. "I do not stand here alone by any means. I am standing on the shoulders of those who believed in me."

"No matter where we are, we have to make the best out of life," Gulley said. "Part of being in the program has allowed us to become a part of something outside of the prison community; it's been a great experience and an amazing achievement."

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

Left, Velda Dobson Davis celebrates a proud moment of achievement. Right: Peers cheering the graduates.

After the presentation of the degrees, Fresno State Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Xuanning Fu proudly announced that the ceremony was not official until the graduates moved the tassels from the right side to the left side, signifying graduation.

Graduate Rebecca Braswell paused to transfer the tassel from Ervin's honorary cap to assure all of the graduates were bestowed the privilege of graduating. Tears and loud cheering erupted at this pivotal moment for the graduates.

The mascot of Fresno State, bulldog Victor E. Bulldog IV, surprised the graduates by visiting with each one and later allowing guests to pet and take photos with him.

Jordan Pickering, associate professor in Fresno State's Department of Criminology, said, "We know that education reduces recidivism; if part of the goal is to reduce recidivism, then we need more programs like this. It is a true joy for us to teach these students."

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

On April 27, the in-Between Committee from Building 512 hosted an event, as part of Victim Awareness Month, celebrated in April.

The event included a walkathon, hand pledges and an open mic.

"There is growth and power in honoring our victims, in holding space that is dedicated just for them," participant Jamie Radloff said.

Left, Poster created by participants during hand pledge.

Incarcerated Students Win 2025 Alpha Gamma Sigma Scholarships

By Amber Bray

On April 26, 2025, Alpha Gamma Sigma (AGS)–the academic honor society and service organization of the California Community Colleges– held an awards ceremony in Ontario, California, to announce its scholarship winners.

Although residents of Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) could not attend, their presence was felt since three won scholarships, including "the top scoring application in the state for academic, service, and leadership excellence," according to the AGS press release.

Wendy Fong, Amy Lou Daniel and Stephanie Erends from CCWF, along with Alex Morris, Michael Thomas and Cecilio Hernandez from Valley State Prison (VSP), were among scholarship winners.

Fong had the top scoring application, Daniel and Morris tied for second in the state for service work, and Erends scored in the top 10 for academic excellence. For having the top scoring application, Fong won the Tom Jackson Award.

The AGS chapter at CCWF is a new chapter, according to Jennifer McBride, Merced College professor and an AGS faculty advisor. Thus, this is the first year CCWF students have been able to apply.

"Getting this honor society up and running has been a challenge and a thrill all at the same time," said Fong. "The amount of people who qualify to be in our honor society is amazing. Many of our professors have said that we work harder than any student they have out there because we're hungry for it, we want it."

Merced College student Wendy Fong, on the left, achieved this year's top scoring Alpha Gamma Sigma application, thereby winning her the Tom Jackson for 2025.

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

"I want to encourage everyone who thinks they can't do it to step out of their comfort zone and apply," said Erends. Being an AGS member is "very feasible for a lot of people. You have to be in Merced College for two semesters and have a 3.0 or higher grade point average."

Daniel said, "Being able to come from a place where I did not enjoy school to learning how to become a student who focuses on greatness is so meaningful. I am thrilled to have been a part of this process."

"This is our first year applying and we won all our awards," McBride said. "Wendy Fong put us on the map. Merced College has never won the Tom Jackson award."

"I can't put my accomplishments into words," said Fong. "It's important to me because I need my daughter to know that it doesn't matter what your circumstances are, you can do anything."

COVER STORY: CINCO DE MAYO
...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

popularity over many years. As of 1998, more than 120 Cinco de Mayo festivals could be found in at least 21 states.

The event was full of surprises for participants. After residents and some staff members assembled, local mariachi band Mariachi La Union strode into the gym to riotous applause. The five-piece band and lead singer were dressed in black pants and jackets, while the four dancers wore traditional, brightly colored Mexican dresses.

Upon taking the stage, the lead singer said, "I have been entertaining for 30 years and have never been received in the way I was received here. It is an honor to have friends here."

Mariachi La Union performed multiple songs, including leading the crowd in singing "Cielito Lindo." The music was so infectious that one officer supervising the event couldn't help but sing along.

Before Mariachi La Union departed CCWF, residents who were scheduled to perform later in the event were welcomed to the stage and danced with the professional folklórico dancers. "It is very special to see the whole community come together, united as one," said resident Analu Cabral.

Watching the mariachi performance, Cabral was reminded of her childhood. "I used to dance folklórico as a child, and so did my mom," she said. "This event is so special to have."

Soon after, a moment of silence was held for Pattie "Smurf" Paschal, a long-time CCWF resident who passed away on April 16.

CCWF dancers then took the stage and performed, followed by an explanation of the meaning of Cinco de Mayo and the rise of Chicano activism. According to resident Maria Quinterobriseno, who addressed the crowd in Spanish, Cinco de Mayo has become a symbol of Mexican resistance to foreign dominion.

"I've been [in prison] for 30 years and this is the most amazing event," said resident Angel Meza. "I feel like I'm home."

Meza, whose mother recently passed, tearfully said, "I feel like my mom is here. She was a mariachi, so hearing the music was so comforting."

Resident Veronica Gonzales expressed a similar sentiment.

"It brings me back to home," Gonzales said. "I have such a sense of happiness and togetherness."

Gonzales and Celeste Carrington were both formerly housed on Death Row, each for more than 25 years.

"After being locked up back there, it is nice to come into this community," Carrington said. "I feel like I'm back in the free world. I feel alive."

Participants were surprised again by nachos and drinks provided by Dolores Canales and her nonprofit organization, California Families Against Solitary Confinement, along with the Abundant Word Christian Center. Canales and her nonprofit also arranged for Mariachi La Union to perform.

At the end of the day, Canales – a former CCWF resident – arrived with freshly made donuts for participants. Canales spoke about her love for CCWF residents, which is evident in how involved she is with institutional events. CCWF residents cheered and shouted their love for Canales, who was smiling from ear to ear.

Photo by PIO Lt. M. Williams

Above, A dancer in mid-twirl performed with a local mariachi band at the day's festivities.
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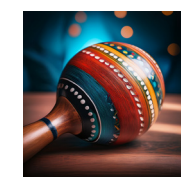


COMMENTARY

Keeping Up With You Know Who

What is the value of celebrity visits for the incarcerated? An editor reflects.

Photo courtesy of CDCR

Kim Kardashian stopped to pose for a selfie with staff at Central California Women's Facility last year.

By Amber Bray

In late 2024, Kim and Khloé Kardashian, Scott Budnick, and Kris Jenner visited Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility (RJD) in San Diego, California.

The group met with a large gathering of men sentenced to life without the possibility of parole to discuss a variety of topics. Two of the men in the group were Lyle and Erik Menendez, who generate headlines on their own. Combined with the Kardashians, the visit was guaranteed to make news, which it did.

The visit was covered by multiple news agencies, including television and print journalists. Entities like Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, TMZ, The Independent, LADBible, People, US Weekly and Marie Claire all reported on the event.

Contrast that with the visit paid to Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and Valley State Prison in early 2024. Kim and Khloé Kardashian, accompanied by Budnick and two of their friends, visited a group of long-term CCWF residents. The group discussed the different issues facing women, some of the reasons women commit crimes, and how the California Model is being implemented at the prison.

> "In order to help showcase issues that are important to incarcerated women, hearing directly from them is incredibly important."

Only local media noted that the Kardashians had been in California's Central Valley and had visited the two prisons, and none reported in any meaningful way about their time with incarcerated women.

Nevertheless, the CCWF visit was filmed by CCWF staff as well as the Kardashians' camera crew for their reality show, "The Kardashians." The episode aired on Hulu on July 17, 2024.

When participants introduced themselves, they spoke about their lives of living amends, their educational achievements, their peer advocacy - including assisting others through the post-conviction appellate process - and their desire to facilitate self-help curricula.

In turn, Anti-Recidivism Coalition life coach Lynne Acosta asked participants how many individuals present were young adults when they committed their crimes, how many had male co-defendants, how many were survivors of domestic violence, and what they're most proud of or things that bring them hope. The entire visit lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Once the episode was edited and aired, CCWF's visit was summed up in 10 minutes. As someone who participated in the conversation, I was struck by how little of what the incarcerated women said was included.

In order to help showcase issues that are important to incarcerated women, hearing directly from them is incredibly important. For example, participants noted the evolution of California's youth offender parole system, which recognizes the "hallmark features of youth" that the United States Supreme Court outlined over a decade ago in Miller v. Alabama, prohibiting judges from automatically sentencing juveniles to life without the possibility of parole.

Those transient youthful attitudes, based on neuroscientific research, can lead to impulsive decision making but can also result in increased receptivity to rehabilitation. However, that legislative evolution has not extended to all long-term offenders in the state.

Despite their coverage, as far as we know, the visit has not yet resulted in any direct or widespread interest in advancing the causes of incarcerated women or making any relevant legislative changes.

I should note that in late February, Senate Bill 672 was introduced, which would extend the youthful offender parole system to young adult LWOPs. Having even a few minutes of Kardashian airtime devoted to women speaking on this issue could have an impact.

Maybe this shouldn't surprise us. Women make up a much smaller percentage of the overall incarcerated population, even though, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, the United States houses more than 30% of the world's incarcerated women as of 2018. And historically, incarcerated women have been less visible to society.

The famed feminist, political activist, and academic Angela Davis and co-author Cassandra Shaylor, an Oakland-based activist and attorney, wrote about this way back in 2001 in an essay for Meridians journal called "Race, Gender and the Prison Industrial Complex: California and Beyond."

Davis and Shaylor point out that international human rights organizations had begun to "address the invisibility of women prisoners." They also mention a handful of groups that were working to keep women's issues in the public conversation even back 24 years ago, like Justice Now, which no longer exists; California Coalition for Women Prisoners; and Legal Services for Prisoners with Children.

Given the popularity of the TV show "Orange is the New Black," as well as a never-ending stream of true crime novels and documentaries, people do seem curious about the experiences of incarcerated women. It is a good moment to push for greater awareness.

Celebrity visits could help with that, since they have an amplification power far beyond any prison activist groups or prison publications. I would love to encourage more celebrity visits for both CCWF and California Institution for Women (CIW).

After many years inside, I've come to welcome these visits over other types of tours, which can cause the prison to go on lock-down or leave us feeling looked at like zoo animals. The one critique I can foresee regarding celebrity visits is that participation is limited, so the majority of the population will feel left out.

The bottom line is that when celebrities tour prisons and lend their voices to causes affecting incarcerated individuals, real change can be made.

But this change should not be focused on men merely because they represent a larger portion of the incarcerated population. We, too, need a seat at the table.

COMMENTARY

We the Hungry Want to Know: Where is the Food?

By Sagal Sadiq

Donna Anderson, an elderly woman incarcerated at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), has just exited the chow hall. She spent her allotted 20 minutes consuming her evening meal, but she's still hungry. She will not stay hungry, however, because once she returns to her cell, she will consume food she purchased from the prison canteen.

So often, as citizens of this great country, we pat ourselves on the back on how progressive we are in the area of human rights. Well, right here, in a prison near you, we are failing our incarcerated individuals by leaving them hungry. They are hungry because the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is not providing them with enough food to keep their bellies full.

If you are an indigent incarcerated person, meaning you have no financial support coming in, then you are dependent upon the state's largesse to feed you enough calories to sustain you. Period.

Angelica Harris, a new indigent arrival to CCWF, said, "The meals and lunches are 'kiddie meals.' Who gets two pieces of broccoli as a serving, or two strawberries?"

Breakfast consists of raw diced potatoes, still-cold gelatinous chorizo, runny grits, a hard biscuit, and apple juice. The hummus lunch is the least popular. It consists of a small packet of pretzels, a 3-oz packet of hummus, a tiny packet of cookies, and a faux juice pack. It comes sealed so one can't be shorted, but what is there to short, really? This is what the state provides as sustenance for the day until dinnertime. Imagine how hungry the incarcerated construction workers must be by the end of the day.

As it stands, not going hungry is often contingent upon whether a) you know someone serving that day who may throw an extra potato on your tray, b) you are bold enough to pull an "Oliver Twist" at the window and ask for "more please," or c) you set aside ego and wander the chow hall asking "are you going to eat that?" On any given day, all three of the above situations happen.

To add insult to injury, per policy, kitchen workers are supposed to throw away all the extra food in dumpsters that are kept locked. Why lock up food trash? Ostensibly, it is so that incarcerated persons don't "Shawshank" their way out. But why throw the food away at all? Why not simply serve the amounts the way the menu reads?

Of course, one is able to utilize the grievance process to address the issue. However, as anyone who has grieved this issue knows, this is a battle. According to Eileen Huber, a long-term resident, "This issue has been grieved before. It is never addressed and so is never resolved."

Each time a grievance is answered, the incarcerated individual receives a response that variation of: kitchen policy states that 3-5 oz ladles are to be used when serving meals. It makes one want to scream: "But the ladles are not being used!" The ladles are there, present and accounted for, but they are not actually being used. And that defeats the whole purpose.

As of press time, none of the incarcerated kitchen workers agreed to comment.

An issue moves from the realm of the pervasive to an unaddressed systemic issue when all the players involved either pass the buck or categorically deny the issue exists. And when avenues that could help fail, a learned helplessness sets in, accompanied by a "why bother" mindset.

Taryn Church said, "I've given up. Nobody is ever going to do anything; I feel sad for people who have no choice but to eat chow hall food."

Bottom line, there is a marked discrepancy between what the menu states and what is actually being served. With the advent of the California Model, it is time for all stakeholders to put into practice what our new carceral culture espouses - normalization. There is nothing more normal than needing to eat. Therefore, it is time for CCWF to feed us what the world at large believes we are being fed.

As simplistic as it sounds, sometimes all it takes is one voice. I hear it said all the time in prison, "closed mouths don't get fed." Don't be the closed, hungry mouth that doesn't get fed.

Felon's Alphabet

By Sagal Sadiq

feel, therefore I am. I feel it, therefore it must be true, right? Wrong.

Allow me to share with you something only a few people know: During my first year of incarceration, I had a mental health clinician tell me that "I was responsible for what I was feeling." All my feelings of anger, sadness, and-a big one for me at the time-fear, were all creations of mine. What? So, I was feeling miserable because I chose to? No way. I simply would not accept that as fact. We argued about that for many sessions. Well technically, I argued; she was just trying to help me see reason which I simply could not, or would not, see.

Why? I did not want to accept responsibility for my feelings. To admit that the responsibility was mine would leave me holding the proverbial bag – a bag containing all manner of crappy feelings I couldn't stomach. I wanted to get rid of them period. But as with anything, there is a process.

"F" is for feelings.
I would be remiss if I didn't begin with the truism "feelings are fleeting." It means feelings will come and they will go. It is a well-known fact that a feeling rarely lasts more than 90 seconds, so if you just sit and endure it for that relatively short period of time, it will go away.

Really, it will, but – and there is a big "but" – you have to just sit in the feeling without amping yourself up with your thoughts. For this to work, you must sit in the feeling, and just feel it.

If it's fear, feel it, embrace it, don't resist it; remember, in another minute you are about to have another feeling – hopefully, one more to your liking.

If it's anger, feel that too, embrace it, again don't resist it; remember what you resist, persists. So, simply sit and feel. Feel that rage, feel that despair, I promise you, you can withstand any feeling for 90 seconds. You are strong and capable and resilient.

If you want to help the process along, you could use a tried-and-true something, called distraction. On any given moment, ask yourself, what delights you? Not what makes you happy, it's too generic and might not be enough when the feelings of doom are overwhelming.

No, ask yourself instead - what delights you? Then go do it, find it, engage in it, eat it – whatever it is, just do it. If you have a favorite song, play it, sing it at the top of your lungs and – if you are feeling brave enough – dance to it, really get into it. There is something about dipping low, shaking your tail feather, getting jiggy with it, and busting a move, that is bound to get you laughing – maybe even at yourself. Then watch the miracle of distraction help you feel better.

If you take nothing else from this month's column, it is this: You are not your feelings. In fact, you are definitely more than the sum of your worst feelings on your worst day. You are strong, capable and resilient.

As far as the doctor whose superlative advice I was resisting, I wish she could see the person I've become today.

FEATURES

From El Chapo to the Chapel

One woman's journey to a better life started with her coming back to faith.

By Nora Igova

Matthew 19:26: "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible."

Rosa Marin came to the United States by herself at age 17 from El Salvador, seeking better opportunities for her and her family. Extreme poverty and domestic violence were the reasons Marin migrated. She was determined to succeed.

When Marin came to America, she had dedicated her life to her Lord Jesus Christ, volunteered as a youth minister and walked the Christian Walk.

Around 2005, Marin said she started neglecting her relationship with God. She replaced prayer time and Bible studies with working overtime and chasing money.

It is during this time that Marin became attracted to a woman and became romantically involved with her. After approximately eight months in a volatile relationship, Marin's outlook shattered when her partner cheated on her.

"Life took an unexpected turn," Marin said, "and due to my internal insecurities, jealousy, codependency and selfishness, I attempted to take the life of the person who took my love away."

Marin came to prison at age 22, hopeless, lonely, desperate and destitute. At that time, she believed the only way to survive was to do whatever it took to provide for herself.

"Freedom was not an option," Marin said. "I thought I was destined to die in prison."

Not only was she in need of financial support, but love, acceptance and a sense of belonging. It was then she was introduced to a few peers who took her "under their wing." Within a year, she was learning how drug operations worked. Soon, Marin decided to separate and do it on her own.

"The experience gave me an extreme amount of power," Marin said "a power and control I had never had before. In an instant, I was liked, loved, accepted and respected – things I wanted to feel all my life. Plus, the financial gain was extremely appealing and attractive."

Marin thought she was only going to get into drug sales to meet her needs. Little did she know she was becoming trapped in an addiction: the addiction of making money.

"That addiction controlled me," Marin said. "I compromised many of my values: honesty, family, freedom, integrity [and] spirituality."

In January of 2017, Marin was taken to Administrative Segregation (Ad-Seg) for an investigation on a long list of charges: shot caller, extortion, drug dealing, sales and distribution. She was transferred to the California Institution for Women (CIW) so she could not interfere with the investigation.

Soon after her transfer, Marin said things started happening that confirmed the power of God manifesting in her life. Corrections officers raided the whole Ad-Seg unit, which made it harder to continue with her drug operations. At that moment, Marin found herself sitting alone in a cell with just her thoughts for company.

Marin said her frustration grew. When she finally received her TV, she started browsing through the channels, and some of the Christian channels drew her attention. Marin said that by tuning into these spiritual messages, her conscience started to wake up.

Rosa Marin spending the day with her God in Building 512's garden.

Photo by CCWF Paper Trail

> "Transformation is possible," Rosa said. "No matter how deep you have fallen, as long as you are still breathing there is still hope. Do not give up!"

Suddenly, she started reflecting on her choices and found herself thinking, "Why am I in a lifestyle I never knew before? Why did I become someone I didn't want to be?"

"As the days went by," Marin said, "the desire to change my life grew in me."

Alone in a cell, Marin realized that she was only OK when she was surrounded by people praising her and showering her with love. Now that they were not there, she felt empty.

Time spent alone with God helped Marin's empathy grow, she said. She would sit and ruminate about her direct victims – Jovel and Carmen – and countless others affected by her poor decisions. Now that Marin was locked away from prison fame, false loyalty, drugs and money, with no one and nothing to distract her thoughts, she started thinking about the things that matter.

On March 14, 2017, at 1 a.m., Marin turned on the TV. There was a pastor from L.A. preaching.

"The words he was speaking started piercing my heart," Marin said. "I felt full of regret and hurt. For the first time in my life, I realized that by selling drugs, I was slowly killing others... I was slowly killing myself."

Marin said made a deal with the Lord and this time it was not a drug deal. She got on her knees and said, "Dear God, if you become the provider and supplier of my needs, I will flush down the toilet the rest of the drugs that I have put away at CCWF, and I will never sell again. God, give me a second chance."

"I experienced something indescribable, something beyond awakening," Marin said.

Five months later, all charges against her were dropped. In June 2017, Marin was transferred back to CCWF and let out of Ad-Seg to the general population. The day Marin was let out, she vividly remembers going to the restroom and flushing every crumb of dope down the toilet.

Not only that, but God spoke to her heart and said, "Daughter, I need you to stop collecting and pardon all drug debts. This profit did not come from me. I am going to teach you how to live by faith. I will be your provider." Marin obeyed.

That same night, as people on the yard heard she was back, she recalled one particular person coming up to her and saying, "Friend, I got your $9,000 in my dad's house. Can I get some more?" Marin responded, "Thank you, friend, but you can keep your money. I have given my life to Jesus, and I will no longer touch drug money."

She looked at Marin with confusion. People were in disbelief with her new self, and she knew it was going to take quite some time for people to see her in a different light.

The following night, Marin was out on the yard with her guitar, inviting people to come to Bible study with her to worship God. She preached seven nights a week. Many people started coming. Some were there to worship, many others out of curiosity.

The gratitude and sense of freedom Marin experiences today are priceless, she said. She lives and breathes the Lord. She serves the same population she once took advantage of.

Today, Marin still has huge crowds around her that want something she has. But that something is not dope, it's hope.

"Transformation is possible. No matter how deep you have fallen, as long as you are breathing, there is still hope," Marin said.

FEATURES

Paper Trail Talks Trauma

Our mental health series aims to jumpstart your healing

By Diana Lovejoy

Trauma may be the most significant common experience among prisoners. Yet, the recent emphasis in our facility that Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) is becoming trauma-informed doesn't ring true. Many of us wait months or years to get into a class that addresses healing, and we can't see mental health counselors on demand.

We hope you'll use our new mental health mini-series to address your trauma when you're ready and not when someone else says it's time. In this section, we'll review materials available on the tablets and share other tips to inspire and guide your mental health journey.

This month we're highlighting the Compassion Prison Project (CPP), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people heal trauma. It has brilliant video series on Edovo on GTL tablets, "Trauma Talks." Below, you'll find a short synopsis of key episodes in the series we hope will encourage you to listen. I guarantee you'll see yourself reflected and feel the empathy of the featured trauma experts. This is not a complete list; at the time of this writing, more is on the way!

AI Generated Image by CCWF Paper Trail

> "Our traumatized brains disconnect us because it's too painful to be ourselves."

Episode 1: What Is Trauma?

"What we have in prisons are the most traumatized people in our society," says Fritzi Horstman, founder of the CPP. Witness a Compassion Trauma Circle in a California men's prison, where the men find healing in discovering their shared experiences.

Trauma differs from common life stressors like paying your bills or caring for family. Learn what abuse, neglect and crises like war do to the brain, body and spirit, and how you can use your own body to start healing.

Episode 2: ACEs

How do our bad childhood experiences affect our brain development? An Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) is any form of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or neglect.

On average, people have one to three ACEs, while about 64% of prisoners have more than six. Through video-chats with successful former prisoners, Horstman shifts our focus away from "What's wrong with you" toward the question we really need to ask: "What happened to you?"

Episode 3: Symptoms of Trauma

See exactly what happens when you're triggered, and why you're "never too old or too broken" to learn to process your emotions. Learn from revealing interviews with Valley State Prison residents by Dr. Nadine Burke-Harris, California Surgeon General.

Bonus! Try the relaxing, trauma-informed yoga session at the end to learn how yoga teaches you to sit with your darkest feelings and emotions and make your pain tolerable.

Episode 4: The Wisdom of Trauma

"The Wisdom of Trauma" is a don't-miss short film. You may feel your own shame or bad feelings slipping away and hope fluttering in. Canadian physician and author Dr. Gabor Mate has dedicated his life to helping people develop the empathy and insight they lost to trauma.

Our traumatized brains disconnect us because it's too painful to be ourselves. We turn to addictions to escape that pain but relief never lasts. Mate says, "When I see human faces I see beauty, I see suffering... and I see enormous potential for transcendence. Our job as human beings is to learn from our suffering."

Episode 5: Developmental Trauma

Explore the direct link between childhood trauma and how you develop. Most of us resorted to survival mode to avoid being hit or abused, or soothe our own stress. This hindered our social-emotional development and made us anxious, fearful, hypervigilant, distrusting, and lonely.

Good news – we can heal for real. "Neuroplasticity" makes our brains adaptable and fixable!

Episode 6: Attachment Theory

What leads us to dysfunctional relationships with friends, family, intimate partners, and others? How we were parented shapes whether we relate to others in a secure and loving way.

It's never too late to learn to have healthy relationships and heal yourself, even become a positive example for others.

Episode 7: Traumatic Brain Injury

Prisoners are generally blamed for their bad choices and behavior. Dr. Daniel Amen, CEO of Amen Clinics, offers a different, scientific perspective. Dr. Amen's brain scans of prisoners reveal that 50-80% of residents in men's prisons, and up to 97% in women's prisons, have Traumatic Brain Injury (T.B.I.).

Scans show physical abnormalities in brain tissue. T.B.I. significantly increases anger, lack of impulse control, and mental health problems. However, you can repair the damage and change your life!

Episode 8: Violence

Truth or Myth? "Violence is a solution. Sometimes, it's the only solution." Myth! This is a distorted belief that's often learned early in life or taught in the context of war.

Explore why we become mired in a vicious cycle of violence. Dr. Phil Stutz, a psychiatrist who formerly worked in jails on Rikers Island helps famous and non-famous clients get out of the "maze" of "Life's not fair; I'm not getting what I deserve."

"Time is fleeting, and we don't have time for that (B.S.)," Stutz says.

Bonus Episode: Gratitude and Loss

Get your tissue ready for the award-winning documentary, "Prison Terminal: The Last Days of Private Jack Hall," about a World War II veteran dying in hospice in Iowa State Prison. Despite massive war trauma, Hall shows how being grateful rewires your brain so you feel happier.

Bonus Episode: Shaka Senghor

Shaka Senghor did 19 years in prison, with seven years' worth in solitary confinement. After release, Senghor rose to corporate success, then dedicated himself to criminal justice reform. He is the author of "Writing My Wrongs" and a speaker, teacher, and father.

Oprah Winfrey goes deep with him on second chances, forgiveness, hope, and justice reform. Winfrey discusses frankly how our prison systems need to change.

FEATURES

A Mother's Day to Embrace

Even when mothers can't be with their children, CCWF residents find ways to celebrate the holiday.

By Delina L. Williams

Brunch, gift cards, and a whole lot of mimosas are usual fare on Mother's Day. However, as one of many incarcerated mothers, separated from their families, the holiday looks and feels different.

As we collectively mother our children over the phone, intimate moments are filled with complications for those mothering behind bars in Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) residents like Jane Laut.

"I'm blessed that my son and I have a good relationship," Laut said. "Even though we talk at least twåo times a week on the phone, he visits me and he keeps me involved in his life."

Laut added that although it's hard not to be with her son, they continue to support each other to stay "strong and positive."

CCWF residents also find support through inside community activities. And making the rounds to see friends on Mother's Day exists even in prison. Many residents come together through meals, gift exchanging, sports, arts and crafts, and sharing what they miss about their children within their social circles. This sharing allows a mother to let go of some of the pain of being away from home.

Sunrise Honor Dorm resident Isabel Rosas has been making her Mother's Day tamales for over a decade because it is a time to have joy, sorrow and some great food all wrapped in a dayroom setting. Tamales, chicken balls, and, of course, cakes of all delectable flavors tempt the palates of mothers gathering together. Opening handmade gifts and sharing a tear or three with those closest helps the day pass and the night come quicker to unleash those hard-hitting truths of another day away from their precious children.

"Mother's Day is one of the hardest days in prison, not only for myself, but for my three children and six grandkids," resident Milani Larrea said.

On the outside, Larrea said she would take her six grandchildren on a weekend trip or to brunch, so they can drive her "wonderfully crazy."

But this year, her daughter and 7-year-old granddaughter were chosen for the Get on the Bus program, so they will be coming to her to celebrate.

Get on the Bus is a free family reunification program that delivers family members to CCWF for Mother's Day celebrations.

There is a quiet dignity in keeping emotions intact during the holidays and Mother's Day is probably the best example of that. Besides being a time when many families will gather and celebrate the matriarch of their family, it is also a time to reflect on how painful these separations can be. Excitement runs deep for Michelle Jones when she explains how she interacts with her beloved sons.

"Each meal turns into competitive dialect, where my sons are trading obscure facts about sports and put their own spin on the team they wish to measure above others," Jones said.

But it's not all laughter, she added.

"With healing also comes tears. With effort, I try to bring light to each of their questions and hope to their uncertainties. Together we brainstorm on ideas as they voice their struggles," Jones said. "Being a mother has made me the happiest; being a mother who lost her freedom has made it the hardest."

Having children live their lives sans mama is a travesty for sure, yet for resident Chace Ward there is hope for parenting to prevail even through the anguish of distance.

There is a lot to unpack with teenagers so having 18-year-old twin daughters and a 13-year-old son gives Ward a reason to be thankful.

"Even though these circumstances are painful and heart-wrenching for my children and I, I feel overwhelmingly blessed to be so involved and still provide the support needed," Ward said.

Any way you look at it, the razor wire should never define how well a mother loves her child.

Data by Prison Policy Initiative, infographic by V. Roseborough

LaKessha Richardson poses with a copy of CCWF Paper Trail in Lusaka, Zambia, during a service trip in May. As part of the group "We Are Our Sisters' Keeper," Richardson and her colleagues visited incarcerated women in a local prison and provided them with supplies.

"I told them about CCWF and some looked over the newspaper while doing so," Richardson said. "Some were teary-eyed knowing it's possible to be heard."

New Publications from Women's Prisons Win Big in Prison Journalism Contest

Three publications from women's prisons took the top prizes this month in the New Prison Publication category of the 2025 Stillwater Awards. The annual contest honors journalism created by incarcerated writers.

Central California Women's Facility's newspaper CCWF Paper Trail placed second. The judges praised the publication for its clean design and its "community newspaper" feel, which the award organizers considered "a huge compliment, since professional community newspapers are complex publications."

Two papers from Oklahoma took first and third place, The Warrior Standard, at Eddie Warrior Correctional Center in Taft, Oklahoma, won the top prize, and The Mabel Bassett Balance,Mabel Bassett Correctional Center in McLoud, Okla came in third.

Photo by Jason Leung on Unsplash

Mothers and Daughters: Doing Time at the Same Time

Image by Te-ge Bramhall from Pixabay

By Kanoa Harris-Pendang

Any woman could be a mother in the biological sense, but it takes a special kind of person to be a mom.

In women's prisons, there are many moms, since incarcerated folks form pseudo-families who meet the basic needs of Maslow's hierarchy in a unique way. They cook and eat together, share happy moments and cry in the sad ones, platonic cuddling and stern encouragements to program and go home. These pseudo-families bring people together that normally would not interact in the free world.

There are also a handful of biological mothers and daughters who are serving their sentences concurrently at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF).

One of those mothers is Noava Martinez, who has been serving life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) since 2009.

Recently, Martinez found out that her biological daughter Sabrina was in county jail facing a life sentence. After speaking with Martinez and listening to her story of motherhood, I learned that she didn't raise Sabrina. Martinez was in and out of her daughter's life until her arrest, when Sabrina was 10 years old. Martinez had no real connection to Sabrina other than being her mother.

Still, the news of her daughter's arrest devastated her. When Martinez was told that Sabrina was on her way to CCWF after being sentenced, Martinez experienced multi-layered fears. What if she gets into a situation or in a room where she is being bullied? What would she do as her mother? With all of these scenarios running through her mind, Martinez sent her daughter a message through friends not to come to CCWF because Martinez wants to go home.

Martinez said it was a hard dilemma. Martinez has been working hard on herself for the past eight years. Knowing her daughter was involved in drugs and toxic relationships, Martinez had to put years of self-help to the test. She had no choice but to let Sabrina know she had changed from the mother she remembered or had heard about. She was no longer gang banging, using drugs or fighting.

This would be an awkward conversation but it was one she knew was necessary. Martinez has taken her rehabilitation seriously so she can one day rejoin her family. How would this conversation go, what would either of them say?

Sabrina made it to the prison's reception center in April and by chance got to see her mother in the hospital, one of the only places residents from different yards interact, while on medical appointments. They embraced and cried tears of joy as neither of them knew what to expect from the other. In that moment life seemed a little kinder. As planned, Martinez told her daughter she was a changed person.

Surprised by her mother's changes, Martinez said that Sabrina assured her she was going to stay out of trouble and told her not to worry. Her daughter received 18 years with half, meaning she would have to do at least nine years. Martinez wonders how all of this will play out. She plans to guide her daughter as best she can without interrupting her own program.

Having done 22 years, Martinez was concerned that those who would have helped keep her daughter on the right path had all gone home. She talked to custody to see if her daughter could be housed on the facility with her. She still has fears even though she knows that Sabrina can take care of and defend herself. A mother's instinct is to protect her child.

Martinez hopes to use the time she does have with her daughter to get to know her and give her answers she needs to heal. In giving her daughter that, she believes she can then start forgiving herself for not being there for Sabrina as her mother. Martinez wants Sabrina to know that she never stopped thinking about her and she has always loved her. She desires to show her daughter what she's doing today,

"I hope she sees the difference so she can make a difference and break the cycle," Martinez said.

Family Visiting is a Lifeline for Mothers

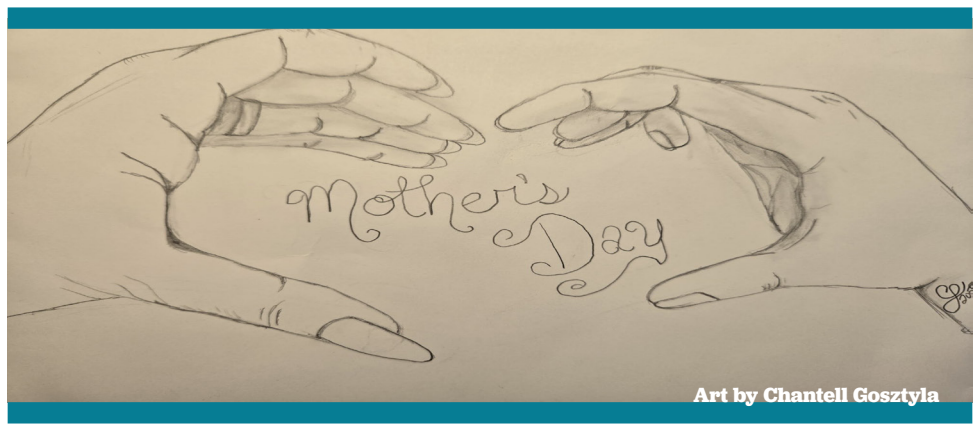
By Nora Igova

Serving life or life without the posibility of parole (LWOP) means long-term or permanent separation from society, making connections critical for the emotional well-being of the incarcerated and their loved ones.

Overnight family visits allow families to maintain meaningful relationships, reducing the emotional drag of long-term incarceration. Especially for mothers and children.

Family visits take place in an apartment-like space inside the prison and can last up to 40 hours. They allow people to spend more time together than is possible in short visiting room conversations, surrounded by law enforcement and other visitors.

In June 2007, all lifers lost their eligibility for family visits due to an incident that had occurred in one of the family units. That incident was an outlier, not the norm. It took a decade-long fight to restore family visits through a special committee action.



Art by Chantell Gosztyla

Those years without visits were devastating for many families, like Anita Ford's, who is serving an LWOP sentence. Ford had visits with her mother and two young children prior to 2007. She remembers that she had a visit scheduled with her children shortly after the repeal.

"I had to tell them that it was cancelled," Ford said. "Hearing my daughters cry on the phone broke my heart."

An LWOP resident incarcerated for over 20 years, Stacey Dyer's kids were ages one and three when she was arrested. All of their memories of her were in prison.
"It was a physical grief I experienced, not being able to hold my small children in an unlimited, unrestrained way," Dyer said.

Her children were 18 and 20 years old when she was finally approved for overnight visits.

Decades later, they still needed human contact with each other. Dyer shared that on her first family visit, together they made a pallet in the living room of the family visiting unit and all slept together.

"They were my babies again," Dyer said, "and they finally had a memory of their mom actually being in a normal human setting with them."

Latoya Jenkins was sentenced to LWOP when her daughters were only four and six years old. She began building their relationships through letters and phone calls. As they got older, it became harder for her to parent from prison.

"The disconnect between a mother and her child is the worst feeling ever," Jenkins said. "I felt hopeless and helpless for years."

Jenkins had not seen her children since the day she was arrested until her daughter turned 18 and they had their first family visit. It was the kind of day mothers inside prison hope for, and only family visiting can make possible.

Jenkins watched her daughter for the first time walk through the gates full of tears, all grown up.

"My heart literally melted," Jenkins said. "We were so emotional and I was able to hold my baby and cry. That day I became a mother again to my child."

FEATURES

A Brief History of Prison Pants

Illustration by Paper Trail

By Diana Lovejoy

If a Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) resident is wearing her pants backward, it means...

a) They got dressed in the dark;
b) They're single and available;
c) The pants fit the same way, anyway;
d) They want to be different;
e) All of the above.

Any of these answers may be true, but if you chose b (single and available) or d (being different), you're most likely to be correct. The way we wear our state clothing may reveal something about our lifestyle, preferences, or state of mind – even within the narrow mandate that we must wear state-issued blue pants.

Our "blues" style has evolved over time, but with no material improvement. Pre-2016, there were relaxed-fit almost-jeans made of a sturdy denim fabric and featuring practical pockets. For the Chowchilla summer (which heats up to 110 degrees), knee-length denim shorts were issued.

The jeans filled the requirement of "appropriateness," and stood up to prison wear with yard-down time and physical-labor jobs. Shorts are the only humane option for when the sweat trickle starts as you're waiting for a gate to open.

But as of 2016, that shred of dignity was snatched away as the facility switched to oversized, toddler-style, shapeless blues just heavy enough to bake your lower half three-quarters of the year. These were a hideous work of anti-fashion, featuring a too-narrow elastic waist which rendered them "one size fits none," cutting into tummies and turning love handles into muffin tops.

Prison pants are constructed by incarcerated people under the supervision of the California Prison Industry Authority (CalPIA), a government agency that oversees more than 100 manufacturing and service industries inside our state prisons.

The 2016 pants are made of two identical cloth pieces stitched together and do not accommodate anything in the "trunk." This could result in *unintentional* backside exposure, which directly contradicts our constant directives to "be appropriately dressed." The only indicator that the pants are on backward is one small square pocket, perfectly designed for losing your ID, lip balm, or pens.

This iteration of CalPIA pants came in petite or tall sizes (tall only from size medium up), but those were as findable as an endangered species. This (tall) writer tried for years to obtain an extended-length small pant, with no luck. Otherwise, shorter or taller pants are not available onsite despite residents' enormous height disparity, from under five feet to over six feet. The theoretical sizing offered on the website, from small to 7X-large, accommodates width, not so much length. Hello, flooding!

However, there is potential help for your tailoring needs. If your height or sizing falls outside of the available range, you can ask the Clothing Distribution Supervisor for an extension or hemming of your pants. According to DOM section 54060. 5.5, any non-medical staff person can authorize clothing tailoring if it is deemed necessary for proper fit.

> People embraced sagging as a style statement, "to create a cultural space for themselves to do their own thing," said Medeon Dean.

When you dehumanize and de-feminize a group of women, what happens? People get creative to make their clothes fit better, which means alteration. If altering clothes is technically prohibited, then at least pant sizing must accommodate all shapes and body types. One popular fix alleviates pressure on the tummy: cutting the tight, narrow waistband and inserting extra elastic. Otherwise, the pants sit precariously below the roll. Stretch fabric is the minimum solution for sizing needs.

Most commentators trace the origins of today's style of sagging to our very own prison system, where baggy uniforms and a prohibition on belts meant pants were riding low.

In 2023, residents heard that jeans were coming back, but were palpably disappointed by an essentially shapeless, trash-bag style, now with two longer front pockets. Props for the functional pockets. Meanwhile, the old-school denim jeans remain coveted. Some long-term residents still wear this sturdier style.

But, where are the shorts? Shorts were once again approved by California Department of Corrections before the summer of 2024, yet residents are still waiting.

Let's look at pockets in more depth. For some unexplained reason, CCWF residents are not allowed to have pockets in their "grays," or the attire worn on local yards. This means exercising on the yard with nowhere to put your ID, lip balm, water bottle, sunblock, shades, etc., except for tucked unceremoniously into a sports bra or rear waistband. Can you envision the inherent problems? Sweat, objects falling out of clothes, inappropriate digging into your bra on the yard.

Currently, a men's baggy, gray jogger with one small side pocket is available through one of our quarterly prison vendors. Yes, one pocket. It's weird to try to be casually comfortable standing with only one hand in a pocket.

And then there's the saggin'. Sagging (wearing your pants low on the hips, exposing some undergarment or skin) has been present in counter-cultures for many decades. Sagging appeared in the anti-Vietnam War era of the 1960s when the "hippie" movement promoted peace, love, and hip-slung bell bottoms. Most commentators, however, trace the origins of today's style of sagging to our very own prison system, where baggy uniforms and a prohibition on belts meant pants were riding low.

Sagging was widely popularized in the 1990s, particularly in the rap and hip-hop scenes. Marked by groundbreaking artists like M.C. Hammer and Missy Elliott, these music genres proliferated with talented Black artists, who also created their own expressions of identity through fashion. Many artists adopted variations on sagging – from The Beastie Boys' low-riding to Kriss Kross, who sported their pants hip-slung *and* backward.

Also in the 1990s, Britney Spears was performing in shiny white pants slung low enough to show all of the abdomen plus the top of her thong. The low-n-casual attitude spread throughout California's surf and skate culture of the 90s and persists today. Lowered waistbands went mainstream, and chain stores like The Gap Inc. started marketing low-rise and hip-slung jeans. By the early 2000s, the definition of "waistband" was forever changed in everything from soccer shorts to yoga pants.

People embraced sagging as a style statement, "to create a cultural space for themselves, to do their own thing," said Medeon Dean, our own talented rap and performance artist. Dean, who had a rap artist identity outside, remembers "taking clothes and wearing them in a different way. We'd turn pockets around or put pockets where they're not supposed to be. Some would wear four or five pairs of different colors, so you could see the different waistbands."

Turning pants so the pockets are in front carries a different meaning in CCWF culture: that the wearer is available for potential relationships.

We must distinguish between "sexy sagging" – which shows off a fit performer's low midriff – and the "raunchy" look with pants riding *underneath* the backside. This projects a don't-care attitude and can show disregard for authority.

Here's the thing about pants: You can issue a standard uniform, but women and transgender people automatically express their individuality with their vastly different shapes and sizes. You can make us wear the pants, but you can't dictate how we wear them. Our residents have proven that even institutional pants can be a style statement.

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